United Nations S/2018/865

Security Council

Distr.: General
25 September 2018

Original: English

Seventy-third session
Agenda item 70
Promotion and protection of the rights of children

Children and armed conflict in South Sudan

Report of the Secretary General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions, is the second report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in South Sudan. It contains information on the six grave violations[1] against children that occurred between 1 October 2014 and 30 June 2018, the context in which they took place and identifies, where possible, the perpetrators.

The report documents alarming levels of all six grave violations against children committed by all parties to conflict throughout the reporting period, as well as the intensification of the impact on children as conflict progressively expanded from the greater Upper Nile region to the greater Equatoria region.

Recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence and abductions by all parties to conflict were documented at particularly worrisome levels. Numerous incidents of attacks against schools and hospitals were verified throughout the reporting period.

In addition, high levels of denial of humanitarian access to children were documented, levels which were exacerbated after the crisis of July 2016. That, in parallel with a worsening security situation, impeded the ability of the United Nations to document and respond to violations against children.

The report provides a series of recommendations to end and prevent grave violations against children in South Sudan and to improve their protection.

[1] Recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abductions and denial of humanitarian access to children.

18-15894 (E) 121018

Please recycle

I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the second report of the Secretary-General on the situation of children affected by armed conflict in South Sudan and covers the period from 1 October 2014 to 30 June 2018. It describes the trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children since the previous report (S/2014/884) and outlines challenges and progress in improving the situation of children since the May 2015 adoption of the conclusions of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (S/AC.51/2015/1). Perpetrators of grave violations are, where possible, identified in the present report. In that regard, in the annexes to my most recent annual report on children and armed conflict (S/2018/465), the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), pro-Taban Deng Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO), pro-Machar Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (pro-Machar SPLA-IO) and the White Army was listed for the recruitment and use of children. SPLA was also listed for killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals and the abduction of children, and pro-Machar SPLA-IO and pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO were listed for the killing and maiming of children.

2. The reporting period was marked by severe and persistent violations committed against children, including widespread killings, massive recruitment and use, sexual violence and abductions. The greater Upper Nile region witnessed gross human rights violations and abuses, including of children, as well as serious breaches of international humanitarian law, fuelled by inter-ethnic tensions, often emanating from historical disputes over land and resources and exacerbated by environmental change. The impact on children was devastating and had far-reaching consequences on individual lives and the social fabric.

3. Owing to the persistent denial of access, in particular in remote areas, resulting from bureaucratic impediments imposed mainly by the Government and security constraints, information collection was hampered throughout the reporting period and exacerbated after July 2016. That was illustrated by the increase in the number of denials of humanitarian access from 2016 (408) to 2017 (613), in parallel with a decrease in the number of verified violations from 2015 onwards and of incidents that the United Nations was unable to verify (1,008). It is therefore estimated that the violations committed against children were higher than reflected in the present report. However, the data herein provide an indication of the scale and nature of the grave violations against children in South Sudan.

II. Overview of political and security developments

A. 1 October 2014 to 30 June 2016

4. The conflict that erupted in December 2013 continued in the period from October 2014 to June 2016, predominately in Upper Nile, Unity and Jonglei. In 2014, several towns, including Bor, Bentiu and Malakal, were intermittently controlled by different factions. Fighting caused major displacements and sparked a humanitarian crisis. Unity witnessed some of the most persistent fighting, with spikes in October 2014 and in April to August 2015, mainly due to significant military offensives launched by SPLA. Other parts of the country were largely spared from armed conflict but affected by occasional intercommunal conflict and cattle rustling, which led to the killing, maiming, displacement and abduction of children.

5. Several rounds of mediation efforts by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in 2014 did not yield any significant agreement between SPLA and SPLA-IO, and the ceasefires obtained were consistently violated. In March 2015, IGAD-sponsored negotiations between SPLA and SPLA-IO were suspended and followed by a significant escalation of violence in April and May in the greater Upper Nile region. However, on 17 August 2015, an opening emerged with the signing of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan and a ceasefire under the auspices of IGAD. The Agreement outlined steps towards a Transitional Government of National Unity and contained child protection provisions urging the parties to refrain from the "recruitment and/or use of child soldiers" and "acts and forms of sexual and gender-based violence" and called upon the parties to "ensure the immediate and unconditional release of (...) child soldiers who are under their command or influence". The Agreement resulted, in April 2016, in the return from exile and swearing in of Riek Machar as First Vice-President of South Sudan and in the inauguration of the Transitional Government of National Unity.

B. 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2018

6. Although the Transitional Government of National Unity existed for a 30-month period, the lull in the conflict was short-lived as fighting broke out at the presidential palace during a meeting of the President and the First Vice-President in July 2016, which saw Riek Machar return into exile and his replacement by Taban Deng Gai as First Vice-President. Those developments resulted in fighting in Juba, Central Equatoria, between supporters of Salva Kiir and Riek Machar and in the fragmentation of SPLA-IO between Riek Machar and Taban Deng Gai. The July 2016 conflict also led to an expansion of the conflict from the greater Upper Nile region to the greater Equatoria region, which previously had been largely unaffected. Despite international calls for the Government to end atrocities against civilians and warnings that a process of ethnic cleansing could unfold in the country, offensives by SPLA and fighting with armed groups continued unabated. The country had almost plunged into famine by the end of 2016. The ensuing declaration of war by Riek Machar and a cabinet reshuffle by the President in favour of SPLA-IO members loyal to Taban Deng Gai further worsened the crisis.

7. Despite a unilateral commitment by Salva Kiir to a ceasefire in May 2017, it was quickly violated, including with attacks on the SPLA-IO stronghold of Pagak, Upper Nile, and ambushes along major roads in the greater Equatoria region. In that context, in June 2017, IGAD sought to reinvigorate negotiations by creating a high-level revitalization forum to, inter alia, discuss measures to restore a permanent ceasefire and to implement the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan.

8. The second session of the high-level resolution forum resumed in Addis Ababa in February 2018, amid condemnations by the African Union and Troika members of breaches of the ceasefire and patterns of violations, including sexual violence and child recruitment and use. The session concluded on 16 February without significant results. Following another round of talks in May 2018, a face-to-face meeting took place between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar in Khartoum, which resulted in the signing of the Khartoum Declaration of Agreement between Parties of the Conflict of South Sudan in June 2018.

9. In parallel, following clashes between SPLA and pro-Machar SPLA-IO in Unity, SPLA launched an offensive in southern Unity from April to May 2018, targeting opposition-controlled villages and committing gross violations and abuses of human rights, including forceful displacement, vast and indiscriminate killing and shelling, rape and sexual abuse and the burning and pillaging of villages, with a devastating

impact on children. On 13 July, the Security Council imposed an arms embargo on South Sudan, barring all States from providing weapons to the country until May 2019 (see Council resolution 2428 (2018)).

10. The conflict in South Sudan became the largest source of displacement in Africa, with 4.3 million people displaced, of whom 1.84 million were internally displaced and 2.48 million were refugees.[2] At the time of writing, more than 88,000 children had sought refuge in United Nations protection of civilians sites. Since 2013, more than one third of all schools have been attacked, and 2.4 million children have been deprived of education. That dramatic situation has been compounded by episodes of famine in parts of the country since 2016, and by epidemics of cholera, malaria and other illnesses that exerted a heavy toll on children.

III. Parties to conflict in South Sudan

11. During the reporting period, the full or partial integration of armed groups into SPLA and other Government security forces continued, including with the integration of the South Sudan Democratic Army-Cobra Faction (SSDA-CF) in 2015, as well as of the South Sudan National Liberation Movement (SSNLM) and pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO beginning in 2016. While SPLA was the main perpetrator of violations, other Government security forces and authorities played an active role in committing violations against children, including the South Sudan National Police Service (SSNPS), the South Sudan National Wildlife Service (SSNWS), the National Prison Service (NPS), the National Security Service (NSS) and the National Fire Brigade.

12. After July 2016, SPLA-IO splintered into two groups, namely pro-Machar SPLA-IO, with a leader in exile, and pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO, which sided with the Government. Despite the exile of Riek Machar, his group retained control of Pagak and several locations in the greater Upper Nile region.

13. Other armed groups splintered, disintegrated and re-emerged, often taking part in localized fighting, siding with either SPLA or SPLA-IO. For instance, the White Army, a loose coalition of community defence groups active mostly in the greater Upper Nile region, associated primarily with pro-Machar SPLA-IO, as did the National Salvation Front (NSF), led by Lieutenant-General Thomas Cirillo, who defected from SPLA. An SSDA-CF splinter group sided with NSF under the leadership of Adoch Agul against Government forces in the area of Pibor, Jonglei. The South Sudan People's Patriotic Front (SSPPF), based in Western Equatoria, and Johnson Olony's armed group also associated primarily with pro-Machar SPLA-IO in its stronghold in Upper Nile. The proliferation of parties to conflict increased the volatility of the conflict and spurred a demand for children in their ranks.

IV. Grave violations against children

14. In that context, alarming levels of all six grave violations were committed by all parties to conflict. Children were affected in multiple and often compounding ways, and large numbers of children were used to commit violations against other children and civilians during their association with parties to conflict.

15. During the reporting period, the United Nations verified a total of 1,235 incidents of recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual

[2] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "South Sudan: Humanitarian snapshot", July 2018. Available at https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-humanitarian-snapshot-july-2018.

violence and abductions, affecting 9,268 children (7,201 boys, 1,966 girls and 101 of unknown sex).[3] A total of 5,693 children were affected in the three last months of 2014 and in 2015, 1,630 in 2016, 1,398 in 2017 and 547 in the first half of 2018. In addition, the United Nations verified 1,496 denials of humanitarian access to children and 163 attacks on schools and hospitals. Furthermore, there were 965 incidents estimated to have affected more than 9,500 children that the United Nations was not able to verify. The great majority of verified incidents of violations took place in Unity (630), followed by Upper Nile (105), Jonglei (93), Central Equatoria (92), Western Bahr el-Ghazal (91), Western Equatoria (90), Warrap (64), Northern Bahr el-Ghazal (34), Eastern Equatoria (27) and Lakes (9).

16. Recruitment and use remained the most prevalent violation. Children were recruited in internally displaced person camps, in United Nations protection of civilians sites, in schools and in their own homes and communities. An enduring concern during the period under review was the targeting of children on the basis of their ethnic affiliation and for their alleged association with parties to conflict.

17. Grave violations against children peaked in 2015 owing to military offensives launched by SPLA in the greater Upper Nile region on areas controlled by SPLA-IO, followed by offensives in Central Equatoria in July 2016 and Eastern Equatoria in April 2017. The security situation was volatile and fighting persisted and intensified intermittently throughout the reporting period.

A. Recruitment and use

18. Recruitment and use of children by all parties to conflict remained a persistent violation over the reporting period. The United Nations verified 513 incidents, affecting a total of 5,723 children (5,320 boys and 403 girls), 2,948 of which were affected during the last three months of 2014 and in 2015, 1,122 in 2016, 1,221 in 2017 and 432 in the first half of 2018. In addition, 654 incidents of violations, affecting 7,220 children, were documented but remained unverified.

19. Of the children who were recruited and used, 2,437 children (43 per cent) were recruited and used by Government security forces, including SPLA (2,382 children, including 124 girls), SSNPS (49 boys), SSNWS (4 boys) and NPS (2 boys). With regard to armed groups, children were recruited and used by pro-Machar SPLA-IO (1,447 children, including 5 girls), pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO (801 children, including 46 girls), SSNLM (632 children, including 218 girls), Johnson Olony's armed group (133 boys), SSDA-CF (102 boys), the White Army (91 boys) and SSPPF (80 children, including 10 girls). Unity remained the epicentre of recruitment and use (247 incidents), followed by Upper Nile (67) and Jonglei (59).

20. The majority of children associated with armed forces and groups were used in support roles, including as cooks, porters, spies or bodyguards to senior commanders. A 13-year-old boy, who escaped pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO in Unity in March 2017, reported that boys were used to collect water and firewood, clean the barracks and cook. When they got tired and were unable to carry out their tasks, they were beaten and made to stand in the sun all day without food. Children associated with SPLA staffed checkpoints, rode in military vehicles and were used as bodyguards to commanders.

21. Children were also armed, trained and used in active combat. In April 2015 in Upper Nile, older boys associated with Johnson Olony's armed group were given

[3] The term "incident" describes an action by a party to conflict that leads to one or more grave violations. "Violations" or "cases" refer to each individual child or protected structure affected by an incident. A single incident may therefore result in multiple violations.

small arms and trained in combat, while younger children were used for support tasks such as cutting wood and fishing. Children were used to commit atrocities against civilians, including other children. In 2015, during a military offensive in Unity, one girl survivor recounted that eight boys, between 12 and 16 years of age, had killed her uncle. In that same offensive, 25 boys associated with SPLA, some as young as 12 years old, carried weapons, beat older people in the village and set houses on fire. A 15-year-old boy, who was abducted along with 20 other boys, and who subsequently escaped from SPLA, recounted that he had been ordered to kill all men and boys encountered during the Unity offensive.

22. Girls were also recruited and used and were observed in military uniforms, carrying weapons and manning checkpoints with adult soldiers. Girls who had escaped reported having been sexually abused and used for domestic chores. Girls were particularly affected by the military offensives in Unity in 2015, when they were used as sex slaves and to carry looted goods. In Leer County, Unity, in May 2015, a 17-year-old girl was abducted, beaten and raped for six days by different SPLA soldiers and used by SPLA soldiers to carry looted goods.

23. Children were frequently recruited in forcible mass recruitment exercises. In January 2017, the United Nations verified the mass recruitment of over 150 boys at a cattle market, which had been ordered by a Government official in Unity. The new recruits were provided weapons stolen or collected from older community members. In another instance, in January 2014, seven boys in Unity were forcibly abducted and recruited by pro-Machar SPLA-IO. The boys were taken to a military barrack, where they received one year of military training before being sent to the frontlines in Unity's oil fields. One 17-year-old boy managed to escape in December 2017.

24. Children were often recruited and used to boost numbers and to meet requirements set by military leaders. Reports were received of county commissioners affiliated with SPLA-IO in Unity recruiting children to meet quotas. For instance, in the counties of Leer and Mayendit, in Unity, between 250 and 500 children were recruited into pro-Machar SPLA-IO in March 2015 by local chiefs who had to meet quotas for new recruits. In addition, in April 2017, pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO soldiers forcibly recruited young people, including children, in Rubkona County, Unity, to boost their numbers. Poverty and lack of opportunities were also drivers of child recruitment and use. Several children stated in interviews that they had joined SPLA owing to poverty, since they were paid between 700 and 1,500 South Sudanese pounds per month (between 5 and 12 United States dollars) by SPLA.

25. Despite national laws prohibiting the recruitment and use of children, parties to conflict repeatedly argued that child recruitment and use was not illegal if children joined voluntarily. In March 2015, a SPLA deputy commander in Mayom County, Unity, stated that he was using boys as bodyguards to "keep them out of trouble". In a separate instance in Unity in March 2015, a SPLA-IO county commissioner argued that the local authorities did not consider the recruitment and use of children illegal because the children could not attend school and needed food, which was being provided to them by the armed group. Similarly, in January 2017, a commander aligned with pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO contended that children were voluntarily joining the group because they needed protection, food and clothing.

26. The recruitment and use of children was often connected to other grave violations. In Rubkona County, Unity, in April 2015, United Nations staff encountered a 14-year-old boy formerly associated with SPLA who had been injured by SPLA soldiers who shot him while he was attempting to escape. Similar incidents were verified of boys receiving lashes for misfiring their weapons, and in one incident in January 2017, a 10-year-old boy associated with SPLA was beaten by his commander for having fired his weapon during a patrol in Leer County, Unity.

27. Released children were also at risk of re-recruitment, in particular in the absence of long-term options for their reintegration. In Pibor, Jonglei, 21 boys previously released from SSDA-CF were used by the same group to fight SPLA in February 2016. In February 2017, the United Nations verified the re-recruitment of four boys by the SSDA-CF in Pibor.

28. From 2014 to 2016, the United Nations received unverified reports of cross-border recruitment of children by Sudanese armed groups, including the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/North and the Justice and Equality Movement, some allegedly in refugee settlements in Upper Nile.

Deprivation of liberty of children for their alleged association with armed groups

29. The United Nations verified eight cases of detention of children by SPLA (12 boys) and NSS (1 boy) for their alleged association with armed groups. There were reports of extrajudicial killings and ill-treatment of children while in detention. In March 2017, a 17-year-old boy who was arrested by SPLA in Western Bahr el-Ghazal for his alleged association with SPLA-IO was later found dead with multiple wounds.

B. Killing and maiming

30. The United Nations verified a total of 394 incidents (240 killings and 154 maimings), affecting 987 children (594 boys, 292 girls and 101 of unknown sex). Of the children involved, 669 were killed or maimed in the last three months of 2014 and in 2015, 179 in 2016, 93 in 2017 and 46 in the first half of 2018. In addition, 197 incidents of killing and maiming, affecting 864 children, were documented but not verified.

31. Government security forces were responsible for 79 per cent (776) of the total number of child casualties. Of those, 773 children (459 boys, 224 girls and 90 of unknown sex) were killed or maimed by SPLA; 2 boys by SSNPS and 1 boy by the National Fire Brigade. With regard to armed groups, the killing and maiming of 33 children (19 boys, 11 girls and 3 of unknown sex) were attributed to pro-Machar SPLA-IO; 11 to SSNLM (6 boys and 5 girls); 6 each to Johnson Olony's armed group (6 boys) and SSDA-CF (4 boys and 2 girls); 5 to pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO (4 boys and 1 girl); 4 boys to SSPPF; and 1 boy to the White Army. In addition, 50 children (31 boys and 19 girls) were affected by cross-fire between SPLA and pro-Machar SPLA-IO, and 95 child casualties were due to explosive remnants of war (57 boys, 30 girls and 8 of unknown sex). Most incidents took place in Unity (203), followed by Western Bahr el-Ghazal (56) and Central Equatoria (41).

32. The vast majority of children were killed or maimed while implicated in or affected by military operations carried out by SPLA, or during clashes with armed groups. Children were often caught in crossfire or directly targeted and summarily executed, including through close-range shooting. Children were killed or maimed as they were seeking safety in or while inside United Nations protection of civilians sites. Information was also received regarding children drowning while crossing rivers as they fled SPLA attacks.

33. At the height of the military offensives in the greater Upper Nile region in 2015, 118 verified incidents of killing and maiming occurred, affecting 488 children (248 boys, 160 girls and 80 of unknown sex). Civilians, including children, were targeted by all sides, often on the basis of their ethnic affiliation. Incidents that took place during the Unity military offensives were particularly egregious, with children beaten to death, hung from trees, thrown into burning houses, tied up, executed and run over

by military vehicles. In one incident in Upper Nile in September 2015, two boys approximately 7 years of age were found hanging from trees along with several women after an attack by SPLA. In June 2016, during fighting in Wau, Western Bahr el-Ghazal, 44 children were killed and 7 were maimed owing to their alleged support for opposition groups or when trying to escape SPLA forces. In October 2016, a number of civilians, including 23 children, were allegedly locked in a shipping container by SPLA in southern Unity, resulting in the death of all except 1 child.

34. Boys were specifically targeted, reportedly to prevent future counter-attacks. According to reports, during the May 2015 attacks in Koch County, Unity, soldiers had said that "boys would be killed and castrated and girls would be taken with the soldiers". Bodies of castrated boys were found by survivors on their way to the United Nations protection of civilians site in Unity and in other locations in southern Unity. In one instance in November 2015, a 5-year-old boy attempting to escape during an SPLA attack was captured and his throat slit owing to his gender.

35. Children were also killed and maimed in crossfire between SPLA and armed groups in the greater Equatoria region. In July 2016, the United Nations verified the killing of a 9-year-old girl in crossfire during a clash between SPLA and SSPPF in Yambio, Western Equatoria. In July 2016, in Juba, Central Equatoria, four children were killed in crossfire between SPLA and pro-Machar SPLA-IO, including a 15-year-old boy who was seeking refuge at a United Nations protection of civilians site. More reports of child casualties during fighting between SPLA and pro-Machar SPLA-IO in the greater Equatoria region, in particular in Central Equatoria, could not be verified owing to access constraints.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

36. The United Nations verified 200 incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence, affecting 658 children (including 7 boys), 442 of whom were affected in the last three months of 2014 and in 2015, 142 in 2016, 55 in 2017 and 19 in the first half of 2018. The United Nations also received reports of 75 incidents, affecting 541 girls, that could not be verified. Close to 75 per cent (148) of the total number of cases involved gruesome gang rapes. The full scale of sexual violence affecting children is believed to be underreported, in particular against boys, owing to fear of stigmatization and reprisals and to the lack of adequate support services and avenues for accountability. The decrease in verified incidents from 2016 (142) to 2017 (55) is ascribed to the increasingly restricted access to conflict-affected areas.

37. Of the total number of affected children, 95 per cent (629) were subjected to sexual violence by Government security forces, including SPLA (615 children; 608 girls and 7 boys), SSNPS (9 girls), NSS (2 girls), SSNWS (2 girls) and NPS (1 girl). With regard to armed groups, the rape of 15 girls was attributed to SSPPF; 10 girls to pro-Machar SPLA-IO; 3 girls to pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO; and 1 girl to SSNLM. Most incidents took place in Unity (98), followed by Central Equatoria (34) and Western Equatoria (18).

38. Continued fighting and widespread indiscriminate attacks on civilians exposed children to sexual violence. The use of sexual violence and rape was systematic and employed as a tactic of war with ethnic and political undertones during military operations and in ambushes on civilians fleeing to United Nations protection of civilians sites. As mentioned in the section on killing and maiming, boys were also targeted through castration and sexual mutilation. The use of sexual violence and rape in military operations expanded as fighting erupted in the greater Equatoria region in 2016 and 2017.

39. Sexual violence was used as a form of collective punishment to instill fear and humiliation within communities. Numerous examples of that pattern were verified, including in Unity, in May 2015, when 95 children, including 4 boys, were sexually abused or raped during military offensives. In another incident in Unity, in October 2015, a woman was tied to a tree by SPLA soldiers after they had killed her husband, forcing her to watch as her 15-year-old daughter was raped by at least 10 soldiers. In August 2016, 10 girls and 2 older women who were fleeing fighting in Leer County, Unity, and heading to the United Nations protection of civilians site in Bentiu, Unity, were stopped on the way there by some 20 SPLA soldiers and taken into the bush and raped repeatedly. Similarly, SPLA soldiers raped or gang-raped 34 girls and 30 women from villages in Koch County, Unity, in December 2015 and January 2016. In April 2018, sexual violence was used extensively during indiscriminate attacks on villages by SPLA soldiers and armed youth in Unity.

40. Children were also raped when performing domestic chores, when venturing out of United Nations protection of civilians sites and at checkpoints. For instance, in Wau, Western Bahr el-Ghazal, SPLA soldiers attempted to rape three girls collecting firewood outside a United Nations protection of civilians site in November 2016 but were stopped by United Nations peacekeepers. During fighting in Juba, Central Equitoria, between July and December 2016, 12 girls were raped by SPLA soldiers at military checkpoints or near military headquarters.

41. Rape and other forms of sexual violence often occurred in the context of other grave violations, such as recruitment and use or abduction. In Yambio, Western Equatoria, in January 2018, a 12-year-old girl was abducted with her mother by pro-Machar SPLA-IO combatants and repeatedly raped by a combatant, to whom she was forcibly married. The girl and her mother managed to escape after three months in captivity.

42. The sexual exploitation and abuse of children by United Nations peacekeepers was a serious protection concern in South Sudan, as documented in my report on special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (A/72/751 and A/72/751/Corr.1).

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

43. The United Nations verified a total of 163 attacks against schools (67) and hospitals (96), of which 69 took place in the three last months of 2014 and in 2015, 33 in 2016, 50 in 2017 and 11 in the first half of 2018. In addition, 69 attacks on schools and 25 on hospitals and medical personnel were documented but not verified. Attacks on schools affected the access to education of tens of thousands of children during the reporting period. Most incidents of attacks on schools and hospitals took place in Unity (34), followed by Eastern Equatoria and Upper Nile (28).

44. SPLA was responsible for almost 60 per cent of the attacks on schools (39), pro-Machar SPLA-IO for 10 incidents and pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO for 3 incidents. Eleven attacks resulted from crossfire between SPLA and pro-Machar SPLA-IO and four from crossfire between SPLA and SSDA-CF.

45. SPLA was responsible for 64 per cent of the attacks on hospitals (61), pro-Machar SPLA-IO for 13 incidents, pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO for 4 incidents, SSPPF for 3 incidents and NSF for 1 incident. Ten attacks on hospitals resulted from crossfire between SPLA and armed groups. Four incidents were attributed to unknown armed elements.

46. Attacks on schools and hospitals, included looting, vandalism and destruction of facilities, attacks and threats of attacks on students and protected personnel, often

occurred during military offensives. In February 2016, three health facilities were attacked and destroyed at the United Nations protection of civilians site in Malakal, Upper Nile, during an attack by SPLA and allied armed youth. In the same attack, three schools were destroyed. In July 2016, during fighting between SPLA and pro-Machar SPLA-IO in Juba, Central Equatoria, one hospital and three health clinics were looted of medical supplies by SPLA soldiers, and two schools were damaged and looted by pro-Machar SPLA-IO.

47. Schools and hospitals were also affected as the fighting spread throughout the greater Equatoria region. In April 2017, 11 schools and 6 health facilities were vandalized and looted by SPLA during an offensive in Pajok, Eastern Equatoria. In one attack, food to feed primary schoolchildren was stolen and two teachers were killed. SPLA affiliated elements were later seen selling equipment from the hospital. In March 2017, five teachers from three different primary schools and two health-care workers in Unity were forcibly recruited by pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO.

48. A total of 103 cases of military use of schools were verified, 47 in the last three months of 2014 and in 2015, 21 in 2016, 22 in 2017 and 13 in the first half of 2018. The military use of schools affected access to education for over 32,500 children. Government security forces were responsible for 81 cases (79 per cent), with SPLA responsible for 69 cases, and other Government security forces and county authorities for 12. With regard to armed groups, 16 schools were used by pro-Machar SPLA-IO, 4 by pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO, and 1 by SSDA-CF. One school that was being used by the Ethiopian National Defense Forces in May 2016 in Jonglei was vacated after two weeks upon notification by the United Nations. In addition, the United Nations verified seven cases of military use of hospitals by SPLA.

49. Schools and hospitals were used as military bases and sleeping quarters by parties to conflict. During a visit to a school used by SPLA in Eastern Equatoria in November 2015, the United Nations observed school benches being used by soldiers as firewood. As at 30 June 2018, 85 schools had been vacated, many of which had been occupied prior to the reporting period, while 35 schools remained in military use.

E. Abduction

50. The United Nations verified 128 incidents of abduction, affecting 1,900 children (1,280 boys and 620 girls). Of those children, 1,634 were abducted in the last three months of 2014 and in 2015, followed by 187 in 2016, 29 in 2017 and 50 in the first half of 2018. In addition, the United Nations received reports of 82 abductions, affecting more than 1,000 children, that were unverified. Most incidents occurred in Unity (82), followed by Western Equatoria (15) and Upper Nile (9).

51. The pro-Machar SPLA-IO was the main perpetrator, responsible for abducting 963 children (938 boys and 25 girls), representing 51 per cent of the total. As for Government forces, 745 children (203 boys and 542 girls) were abducted by SPLA, 149 (96 boys and 53 girls) by SSPPF, 35 (all boys) by Johnson Olony's armed group, 6 (all boys) by pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO, and 1 boy each by SSNLM and SSDA-CF.

52. Abduction was primarily used as a tactic for the recruitment of children into armed forces and groups. In February 2015, 36 boys were abducted for recruitment from Wau Shilluk, Upper Nile, by Johnson Olony's armed group. Elements of the group went house to house and took any male child above the age of 12. In Rubkona County, Unity, in April 2015, 21 boys were abducted from a local market and forced to join SPLA, some of whom were assigned as bodyguards to a commander. In September 2015, in Western Equatoria, SSPPF abducted 30 boys and forcibly brought them to training camps. On 4 May 2017, two 15-year-old boys were abducted during

the night in Upper Nile by pro-Machar SPLA-IO soldiers. The two boys, who were being held in captivity along with five other boys of the same age, managed to escape.

53. Children were also abducted for recruitment from schools. In several instances, parents kept their children home out of fear that they would be abducted while in class or on their way to school. In October 2015, the abduction of 29 boys and 26 girls by SSPPF from a school in Yambio, Western Equatoria, negatively affected school attendance in the area.

54. The 620 girls verified as having been abducted were used for several functions, including for sexual purposes. SPLA was the main abductor (542 girls). During military offensives in Unity in June 2015, seven girls were abducted during an attack on their village in Koch County, Unity, and were raped while being transported to Mayom County, Unity. One girl was killed when she refused to continue the journey. In February 2018, 11 girls on their way to collect firewood in Wester Bahr el-Ghazal were abducted by pro-Machar SPLA-IO. Two girls who managed to escape recounted that they had been sexually abused by soldiers. Two girls abducted by pro-Machar SPLA-IO in May 2018 in Mvolo, Western Equatoria, were held for seven days, during which they were sexually abused, before being released.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

55. The United Nations verified 1,496 incidents of denial of humanitarian access, 295 in the last three months of 2014 and in 2015, 408 in 2016, 783 in 2017 and 10 in the first half of 2018. Some 84 per cent of the incidents were attributed to Government authorities (1,120), including SPLA (512), state and county authorities (195), NSS (164), SSNPS (156) and other government institutions (93). Incidents were also attributed to armed groups, including pro-Machar SPLA-IO (181), SSPPF (8), pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO (7), SSNLM (6), the White Army (3) and NSF (1). The United Nations was unable to identify the perpetrators of 170 incidents, often owing to lack of access resulting from active hostilities. Most of the verified incidents occurred in Central Equatoria (363), followed by Unity (235) and Jonglei (191).

56. Cases of denial of humanitarian access to children doubled between 2014 and 2017. Most of the denials were caused by administrative and bureaucratic impediments to gaining access to areas to deliver humanitarian aid to children or resulted from security constraints on gaining access to conflict-affected areas. That type of denial increased after fighting erupted in Juba, Central Equatoria, in July 2016, which hampered the ability of humanitarian workers to promptly and safely reach children in need.

57. Humanitarian workers were also harassed, assaulted, abducted, killed and injured while providing humanitarian assistance. In August 2016, a child protection worker was shot and killed when fighting broke out between SPLA and pro-Machar SPLA-IO in Mayendit County, Unity. In March 2017, six child protection workers were killed in an ambush by SPLA while driving from Juba, Central Equatoria, to Pibor, Jonglei, where they were to implement reintegration activities for children released by SSDA-CF. In June 2017, humanitarian workers came under attack by pro-Machar SPLA-IO in Lainya County, Central Equatoria, while delivering services, resulting in the suspension of humanitarian aid.

58. In addition, during and after the fighting in Juba, Central Equatoria, in July 2016, humanitarian supplies were looted and United Nations staff were harassed and intimidated. In one incident, a UNICEF water-truck convoy heading to a United Nations protection of civilians site to refill empty water reservoirs was diverted to an SPLA compound by SPLA soldiers. In another example, in August 2017, SPLA

soldiers looted material provided by the United Nations for child protection programmes in Maiwut County, Upper Nile.

V. Challenges and progress in addressing grave violations against children

A. Engagement with parties to conflict to end and prevent grave violations, including through the implementation of action plans

59. During the period under review, the United Nations continued to engage with parties to conflict to advocate for the ending and prevention of grave violations against children and for the adoption and implementation of action plans.

60. With regard to the revised action plan signed by the Government in 2012, its implementation was seriously disrupted by the ongoing conflict and persistently high levels of violations, mainly perpetrated by SPLA and other Government forces. However, dialogue between SPLA and the United Nations was maintained within the framework of the action plan, in particular at the State level. United Nations engagement with the Government, in particular SPLA, was disrupted, however, by the July 2016 crisis.

61. Following the signature of the recommitment agreement to the revised action plan in June 2014, the Government and the United Nations jointly endorsed a work plan to operationalize its implementation in August 2014 and created a national technical committee to oversee its application. The technical committee agreed to joint assessments by the United Nations and the Government to verify the military use of schools by Government forces, which led to 27 schools being vacated by Government forces between February and June 2015. The technical committee also advocated for the release and reintegration of children recruited and used by SSDA-CF in Pibor, Jonglei, in 2015, which resulted in the release of 1,875 children. A high-level committee created in October 2014 to serve as a forum to engage on child protection issues remained inactive owing to a lack of commitment by the Government.

62. As part of its outreach activities, until the July 2016 crisis, the United Nations supported the translation and dissemination of the revised action plan, along with flyers and posters with key child protection messages, across South Sudan. To reach the local population and raise awareness on the prohibition of child recruitment and use, the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, SPLA child protection focal points and the United Nations collaborated on radio outreach projects with Radio Miraya of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan and community radio stations in Yei, Central Equatoria, and Malakal, Upper Nile. However, apart from those activities, key elements of the agreed workplan, in particular parts related to accountability, remained largely unimplemented, and the recruitment and use of children, as well as other grave violations, continued.

63. The United Nations started to re-engage with SPLA on child protection in 2017, which resulted in the appointment of new SPLA child protection focal points to SPLA headquarters in Juba, Central Equatoria. To strengthen child protection capacity within SPLA, the United Nations and the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission carried out two training of trainers workshops in Juba in 2017 for 70 officers from the SPLA child protection unit. SPLA child protection focal points, in turn, facilitated training programmes within SPLA. High-ranking SPLA officers were also used as facilitators during training sessions organized by the United Nations in Central Equatoria, Eastern Equatoria, Jonglei and Unity.

64. In February 2018, following sustained engagement, the Ministry of Defence and SPLA leadership agreed to provide unhindered access for the United Nations and the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission to undertake joint visits to all military barracks to screen and release children associated with SPLA. However, owing to limited resources, only one joint verification mission took place, in February 2018. In June 2018, the United Nations conducted a two-day workshop for 50 SPLA senior officers from the 10 SPLA divisions at SPLA headquarters on the implementation of the action plan, prevention efforts and accountability for child rights violations by the military.

65. With regard to armed groups, following the commitment made by Riek Machar to my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict in May 2014, in-country dialogue was initiated between the United Nations and SPLA-IO in the course of 2015. Between October and December 2015, the United Nations engaged with 39 senior SPLA-IO officers on the action plan process, which resulted in the signature by Riek Machar on 26 December 2015 of an action plan with the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use as well as the killing and maiming of children. However, despite close engagement with SPLA-IO on the release of children from its ranks, prospects were interrupted in July 2016, with the subsequent splintering of SPLA-IO and the exile of Riek Machar, allowing violations to continue at high levels of violations.

66. Following the appointment of Taban Deng Gai as First Vice-President in July 2016, and in the context of the progressive integration of pro-Taban Deng forces into SPLA, the United Nations engaged in dialogue with pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO on the release of children associated with the armed group. In August 2017, verification and age-assessment exercises were undertaken in Pibor, Jonglei, by the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission and the United Nations. At the end of 2017, Taban Deng Gai acknowledged the presence of children in his group, committed to their release and nominated a child protection focal point to liaise with the United Nations. A total of 468 children were subsequently identified by the United Nations during screenings between August 2017 and March 2018 in Jonglei and Western Equatoria, 314 of whom were released in 2018.

67. In January 2018, the Parliament passed the Civil Registry Act which will, inter alia, render birth registration systematic. However, the Act has yet to be signed into law by the President.

B. The release of children and programmatic response to grave violations against children

68. Engagement by the United Nations and the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission with armed forces and groups led to the release of 2,740 children between January 2015 and June 2018. That total included 1,875 children (1,870 boys and 5 girls) from SSDA-CF, 484 children (302 boys and 182 girls) from SSNLM, 314 children (285 boys and 29 girls) from pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO, 27 boys from SPLA, 25 boys from pro-Machar SPLA-IO, 8 children (5 boys and 3 girls) from NSF and 7 boys from SSNWS. In addition, the United Nations verified a total of 163 children (158 boys and 5 girls) who had escaped or been spontaneously released by parties to conflict. Many of the releases occurred in the context of the integration of armed groups into SPLA.

69. The children received interim care, family tracing, reunification, psychosocial support and education services, along with other services, provided by the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) supported by UNICEF. Released children were assisted

alongside other vulnerable children in their communities of return to prevent resentment, minimize pull factors, and promote acceptance by families and communities. UNICEF and NGO partners also responded to sexual violence cases by providing psychosocial and medical support to survivors, establishing safe spaces for women and girls, training service providers and supporting the development of referral mechanisms. However, the reintegration of children who had been released or escaped was hampered by limited resources, thus increasing the risk of re-recruitment.

C. Legal framework and accountability

70. South Sudan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in January 2015. The Optional Protocols thereto, in particular the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, have not been ratified.

71. As noted in my previous report, credible efforts by parties to conflict, in particular the Government, to hold perpetrators of grave violations against children accountable, remained largely absent. Domestic laws were not systematically enforced, partly owing to resource constraints or infrastructure challenges, but also to a lack of political will. Provisions of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan relating to transitional justice, accountability, reconciliation and healing were not implemented, and progress on the creation of the African Union-mandated hybrid court is slow. Against a backdrop of large-scale grave violations against children and other atrocity crimes committed during the period under review, perpetrators of grave violations continue to benefit from a climate of widespread impunity.

VI. Observations and recommendations

72. I am dismayed by the scale and brutality of grave violations committed against children in South Sudan. I am especially alarmed by the rampant levels of grave violations committed by Government security forces, in particular SPLA. I urge all parties to conflict to immediately halt the violations and abide by their obligations under domestic legislation as well as international humanitarian and human rights law.

73. I condemn the widespread recruitment and use of children by all parties and call upon them to immediately cease that practice and release and hand over all children to civilian child protection actors for their reintegration into their communities.

74. I am alarmed by the pervasive use of sexual violence against children employed by all parties to conflict and call upon the Government to enforce and strengthen the legal framework and ensure that adequate and gender-sensitive services are provided to the survivors, including access to health care, psychosocial support and education.

75. The prevalence of impunity in South Sudan is of grave concern. In that regard, I urge the Government to swiftly address the lack of accountability and to take the measures necessary to ensure that perpetrators among all ranks of its security forces and authorities are held accountable.

76. The denial of humanitarian access to children seriously hampered the ability of the United Nations and partners to respond to grave violations against children. I urge all parties to allow rapid and unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance to children.

77. I urge all parties to expedite the implementation of the action plans that they have signed with the United Nations and to allow access for the United Nations to assess compliance and progress, as well as to monitor and report on grave violations against children.

78. Taking note of the recent provision of access to the United Nations to SPLA barracks for the screening of children, as well as the fruitful cooperation on the release of children and on training activities, I call upon the Government to swiftly engage with the United Nations to revise the existing action plan into a comprehensive action plan that addresses all six grave violations endured by the children of South Sudan. I also urge the Government to include the criminalization of the six grave violations in the upcoming review of the Penal Code and to expedite the signing into law of the Civil Registry Act. Moreover, I encourage the Government to prioritize the prevention of grave violations, including through a national conference on children and armed conflict, and in that regard to collaborate with my Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict following her visit to South Sudan in September 2018.

79. I welcome the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and seek the Government's accession to its Optional Protocols, in particular that on the involvement of children in armed conflict. I also encourage the Government to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration, the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Principles) and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers.

80. I call upon all parties to reinforce their efforts to reach peace by implementing the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan and ensuing commitments, including the provisions on the protection of children. I urge the parties to conflict, as well as the Security Council, the African Union and IGAD, to ensure that issues related to the protection of children and accountability are central to any future political settlement, in line with Council resolution 2427 (2018).

81. While welcoming the release of children, I am very concerned by the severe lack of funding for long-term sustainable reintegration programmes for children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, thus increasing the risk of re-recruitment. I encourage the donor community to increase their funding for sustainable, timely and appropriate reintegration and rehabilitation assistance to children in South Sudan, in line with resolution 2427 (2018).

82. I reiterate my commitment to preventing and addressing sexual exploitation and abuse by all United Nations personnel. In response to the allegations that have been brought to my attention, I urge the Member States concerned to conduct thorough and prompt investigations, which the United Nations stands ready to support.